

# Creating Livable Communities:

## Housing and Transit Policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Comments by Betty Voights, Capital Area Council of Governments, Austin, TX  
Before the United States Senate Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs  
March 26, 2009

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this symposium. My comments will be based on my experience as the executive director of an organization that strives to advocate the Big Regional Picture for every issue and particularly on the issues you are interested in. But with the majority of my career focused on economic development, I believe it is critical to consider how a fragmented and uncoordinated approach to planning can impact a region's economic competitiveness.

Is "livable" community the term that replaced "quality of life" when an economic developer is trying to recruit business investment? It should be. But "quality of life" was a catch-all phrase; every community had great quality of life. We can't be that subjective when we describe "livable" communities. The factors that are becoming necessary to claim this label include green space for recreational uses, affordable housing close to employment centers, and transportation modes to allow mobility. It's a label for communities embracing renewable energy and developing land in patterns that sustain natural resources while avoiding stress on infrastructure.

We believe all those factors are the building blocks for "livable" communities and for an economically competitive region. My staff and I and some really forward-thinking consultants spent a lot of time last year trying to pinpoint what made our region economically competitive. We wanted to look beyond traditional benchmarks like venture capital, education levels, workforce skills, and cost of conducting business. There are many things we are doing right in the Austin region and because of it, we have seen significant investment and growth. But how do we sustain our success – what changes may be needed?

The factors that create livable communities must be addressed in an integrated planning process; rarely will this happen by accident.

The Capital Area Council of Governments is a regional planning commission—more commonly called a council of governments—established under the Texas Local Government Code. We are also an Economic Development District designated and funded by the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) to prepare and implement a five-year comprehensive economic development strategy for our region. Our board also formed a Regional Transportation Planning Organization (RTPO) within our organization. The RTPO is a self-designated program established by our local elected officials to allow us to look region-wide at transportation issues and their impact on land use and economic development. We also work regionally to prioritize potential federal-aid eligible project investments by

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the state, including in our rural portions of the region outside the boundaries of the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO).

We are not the MPO, and while we cover a ten-county region which is experiencing high growth in almost every county, the MPO only covers three of them. And the MPO has performed a commendable job planning transportation, but they are **restricted to only three counties and only to transportation.**

Our region's growth rates are significant. If we use the MPO's population projects which are moderate, and look toward 2035 for which a new plan is underway, 8 of our counties will have over 50 percent growth rates but three of those will be over 140 percent. Bastrop and Burnet counties, projected to grow 154 percent and 99 percent respectively, aren't in the MPO.

If this year's trend continues, almost 20 percent of the people moving into our region aren't moving to a city. Most of them are moving into unincorporated areas choosing large parcels, perhaps a few acres, and erecting a traditional single-family detached home or in many cases, a manufactured home. Children in some of our suburban counties spend over two hours a day on the bus. Housing affordability is a growing problem for our region as it is elsewhere. Until gas prices spiked last year, there was little discussion about transit except for a proposed north-south line from central Austin to a northern suburb with a visionary mayor.

But an article in Sunday's Austin American Statesman read like this: "Smaller cities around Austin are starting to take a harder look at bringing intracity busing systems, connections to Capital Metro bus lines or even rail to their residents."

As a regional organization engaged in regional economic development planning, we recently looked at labor force and the location of employers. Randomly selecting Samsung, located northeast of Austin, and AMD, located southwest of Austin, one factor stood out – their commutersheds were surprisingly large. While both are located in Travis County, each has employees in 10 or 12 other counties. Half of Samsung's 1,146 employees live in a different county than where their job is located. Our capacity to use zip code data to analyze where people live and work has demonstrated this trend for smaller employers also.

All of this becomes more worrisome for our region as EPA looks to designate new Air Quality Nonattainment Areas under its new ozone standards. **Our region's emissions are largely from internal combustion engines and as our congestion rating ranks us worst in the nation among medium urban areas according to the Texas Transportation Institute,** we are sorely aware of what are long-range future might hold. **Once we began considering carbon dioxide emissions, our region will be forced to seriously look at reducing VMTs by changing where we work and live, or how we move between those two places.**

All of this is to say that something must be done to ensure comprehensive regional planning is undertaken that integrates transportation with land use and housing, economic and community development, and environmental resources. But, it should also be guided by a couple basic principles:

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- Comprehensive planning should be regionally-focused, locally-driven in coordination and collaboration by state and local government officials, along with other key stakeholders
- Regional approaches are needed to link urban, suburban and rural portions of a region, including economic development, housing, infrastructure, transportation and workforce solutions, strategies and investments
- Federal guidelines must be incentive and reward based, rather than enforced by federal mandates and requirements; Federal funding for planning, technical assistance and program implementation is essential to the long-term success of individual regions and the nation

Texas has not been known as a state that embraces planning but that is changing. Our own organization's efforts, albeit largely unfunded, have been favorably met by our local elected officials who recognize a broader look at these issues is important. Our neighbor region to the South, San Antonio/Bexar County, has elected officials leading a transportation task force. Their report issued in recent weeks acknowledges the ties between transportation, land use planning, energy consumption, public health, economic development, and air and water quality; its conclusion is that a shared regional vision is needed as well as a shift from focusing solely on roads to the "creation of a multi-modal system supported by changes to land use planning policies."

Most telling is a bill introduced by the chairman of our House Transportation Committee in our current Legislative Session that proposes to establish RPOs (rural planning organizations) throughout Texas to cover every area not in a MPO; the bill proposes to increase planning and decision-making responsibilities at the local level to both of these organizations and will require all modes of transportation be considered, and takes a step toward tying performance measures into the process.

In summary, my 13 years at CAPCOG have seen a region that had a small metro area largely surrounded by rural communities with the beginning of a suburban ring evolve into a region in which every county is experiencing growth beyond what it can reasonably manage. The three I-35 corridor counties have literally doubled in population; according to 2008 estimates by the State Data Center, our region had added 784,000 people since 1990 and the five-county MSA has also increased from 845,227 to 1.7 million.

Many regions like ours may be realizing that better planning is key to sustainability and livability, but a nudge is in order. State and federal programs must move away from silos of funding that cause planning by category (water, air, transportation, economic development) and allow regions to fully integrate planning efforts that ensure all aspects of growth are considered.

Thank you for allowing me to participate in this very important discussion about how we make our communities livable and thus economically competitive, including our nation's rural communities.